

AT LAST TAXICAB WORM HAS TURNED ON HIS TORMENTORS



The nighthawk cabby was the taxi driver's ancestor.

And Now Some of the 4,000 Who Daily Find Cause for Complaint Take Their Grievances to Father Knickerbocker for Quick Action

FACED by one of those buccannery swashbuckling moods, no doubt the average New Yorker is no more imposing in his surrender than a fat white worm. But even a worm will turn, and that may be the explanation of the new attitude of that blithering invertebrate specimen the taxicab user toward his tormentor and persecutor the demon driver.

Or it may be one phase of the English influence which visitors from the West are fond of declaring scornfully is creeping into New York manners until 5 o'clock tea has risen from obloquy to the heights of honored convention. Overcharged tuppence in a public conveyance, every reader of comic literature knows just what steps your testy Briton takes. He makes an impassioned appeal to the nearest lobby, goes round with him and the offending driver to the nearest station house and threatens the matter of tuppence out.

It isn't the trifling sum of money, you know; it's the principle of the thing. By George, as is evidenced by the fact that in his waistcoat pocket at this instant repose a pair of five shilling notes for "Chu Chin Chow" at His Majesty's Theatre, and the show must be half over by now. The next day he writes a little letter to the Times caustically expressing his opinion of a coalition Government which lets vital matters at home go to pot just because there's a bit of a war on, and what is the matter with the blithering idiots in the Home Office anyway?

Whatever the cause, a crusade is on which is likely to make the taxicab plate as honest as the girl who supplies nickels at the automat, and she never makes a mistake. A miracle? Yes, but miracles have been worked before now. Look at the decline of the pirate business at sea. If the pirates can be swept from the seas, why not from the seagoing hacks? Or from the taxis which are their legitimate successors?

Father Knickerbocker is willing to help. He always has been. There is a Bureau of Licenses, and in it an entire division which has charge of public vehicles. It has absolute power over taxicabs, even to the point of compelling owners to shine up the brass work and paint the hood. John J. Drennen, chief inspector, is boss, with considerably more authority than the Czar of all the Russias, and he stands ready at any time to suppress riotousness. This is not exactly news, but it is news that taxicabbers—or

is it taxicabbers, meaning those who are taxicabbed?—are finding it out and taking advantage of it. There are 4,000 taxicabs in New York. Conservative estimates, based on careful inquiry among their customers, indicate that each driver carries at least one passenger a day who thinks, rightly or wrongly, that he has been "stung." That makes 4,000 arguments a day.

Until recently the matter seldom went any further, but lately it has become quite the proper thing to send the kick along to Mr. Drennen. If it is not justified no harm is done. If it is justified—well, the chief inspector can enforce a refund, suspend the driver, impose a fine or revoke the man's license.

He always does the first and sometimes does two or three of those things. He is the Sultan of Taxidom; what he says goes and of late he has been one of the busiest potentates in a busy world.

Among others the chieftains of New York are taking a hand in the new game called "Watch the clock." The inspiration came one rainy afternoon of early autumn at the cocktail hour in a Fifth Avenue club which shall be nameless.

"I rode from here up to Seventy-sixth street last night in a taxi," said one member, who sometimes sees himself called a "mograte" in the newspapers. "The fare was 80 cents. I rode down this afternoon for 65 cents. Now I'd like to see the first driver."

That started a flood of taxicab stories. It seemed to be the universal experience that the same fare never was charged twice for the same distance. That went on and on until a guest from New England broke in:

"Well, why do you stand for it? When you're overcharged why don't you report the offender?"

"I'll tell you why. It's because the average New Yorker had rather mortgage his home and hock the family plate than protest against any public extortion. Any kind of a gouge can be inflicted on him and he will submit meekly—theatre ticket speculators, hat checkers, bread and butter checkers, extra service checkers, taxicab extortionists—anything at all he swallows."

"His fear of a muss or a scene has been developed until he is a jellyfish. He fears to be thought cheap. Present

company always excepted," the visitor concluded with an apologetic chuckle. The shot went home. The New Yorkers had heard the charge before, but this time they acted. They resolved, half in jest at first, to keep tabs on the taxicabs. One or two of them got to the point where they really wrote letters to the Bureau of Licenses. They got their refunds of excessive fares as promptly that they boasted of it delightedly.

The crusade gathered impetus, and now it is well under way. To-day the taxi driver had better pick his mark with uncommon discrimination or he will find himself in hot water.

Conditions have greatly improved. Mr. Drennen says. Whenever he gets a justified complaint—and usually the kicks are justified, for the average taxicab customer has a sense of fairness which prevents him from getting a chauffeur into trouble unless he is sure of his ground—he writes a letter thanking the citizen for his cooperation.

"We're trying to clean this thing up," is what he says in effect, "and the only way we can do it is through your help. We hope you will kick and tell your friends to kick when they are victimized."

Likewise he has a thick scrapbook full of letters from appreciative men who are tickled at finding a man right on the job and a little amazed, too, at discovering how easy it is to get satisfaction. The letters are from lawyers, bankers, theatrical managers, Congressmen, army and navy officers, importers, clergymen and even from a few officials of other cities who have fallen into the toils of the taxi bandits during their visits to the Great White Way.

Many a moving tale comes to his ears. Perhaps the boldest piece of work a taxicab driver ever attempted came off one rainy night a few weeks ago, when the car strike was at its climax.

One of the prettiest actresses on Broadway, whose name calls for heavy black type on the posters nowadays, emerged from the stage door after her performance with her maid and the manager of the theatre. They hailed a taxi and stepped into it. Then the manager mentioned a hotel a few blocks away as their destination.

The driver flew into a rage. It was a wet night, remember. The car strike

was on and the subway service wasn't what it might have been. Taxis were at a premium. This particular driver was looking for a long haul, about \$3 worth, say. He didn't want to leave the ranks for a 40 cent trip and he said so. He ordered Miss Mc— (the name almost slipped out), the actress, that is to say, out of the cab. When the manager protested he responded with profanity.

That case was settled quickly enough when Mr. Drennen collected the facts from witnesses. The man lost his license.

Thus ended the Adventure of the Actress in the Taxicab. Consider now the Incident of the Rich Old Banker.

He was rich, all right, and good natured, and so old that he was rather feeble. His white haired wife was with him, and his daughter also when he came down from an up State town on the Albany boat. He took a taxi to the Prince George Hotel and he paid the \$2 the driver charged, but first he took his number. Calculation by the Bureau of Licenses, when the complaint came up, showed he should have paid but \$1.20, and the driver was forced to refund \$1.80, also to pay a \$5 fine.

The fine might have been omitted but for the driver's own admission.

"What made you do it?" Mr. Drennen asked him.

"I dunno. He looked kind of easy," was the answer that cost him the price of twenty gallons of "kax."

There's another painful little habit that's a sure-fire way to earn a fine. That is for the driver, when his number is demanded, to cover up his badge. The law is that he must give his number to any one who asks for it, which is a good thing to know.

"Watch the clock" is another tip to be taken to heart. Most of the gouges are worked by the "quick flag" trick

so, it is sealed and O. K'd. After that it is inspected every four months. Seven inspectors are constantly on the street watching the conduct of the drivers at the public hack stands, filing complaints when they overrode the legal limit; reporting noisy motors or cars which need paint or cleaning; assuring themselves the meter scales have not been tampered with; placing at license numbers and comparing them with their printed lists of suspended cars to be sure the drivers are not ignoring the suspension. Besides the 4,000 taxis they have 2,000 touring cars and horse drawn licensed vehicles to look over. Outside of that they have nothing in particular to do.

"We're getting the thing cleaned up," said Mr. Drennen. "The public is getting pretty good service from the taxis now, and with the advent of new blood in the business it will get better right along."

"The trouble in the past has been that the old hackmen took hold of the taxis when they supplanted the horse drawn vehicles and their notions of business were hazy. The efficiency expert is setting busy with his cost sheets and detailed daily reports of each car's performance, its takings, its idle miles, its gas consumption and so on.

"The thing will shake down to a strict business basis, and I rather think the individual owner will disappear within a few years, vanishing before the competition of the big corporations. Also I look for lower fares. We may in time get something like the cheap service of London, Berlin and Paris."

He believes too that as a class the taxi drivers are honest, at least comparatively honest.

"I will say that we seldom get a second complaint of any one man," he remarked. "After one scare they take no chances on losing their license or getting a long suspension."

But, of course—Mr. Drennen is not now being quoted—the taxi driver, like the old nighthawk cabby when he replaced, never will be completely reformed.

Picture him on a bitter night, in rags on a windy street. He hasn't had a fare since early afternoon when a boarding school girl and her aunt rode from the Waldorf to the Grand Central, which sillage cost them 20 cents.

It is midnight, and he reflects bitterly that he must buy "kax" on the

For the benefit of those who don't know it this may be elucidated.

The taxicab having gone a mile and a half, 70 cents should be showing on the meter. But the unscrupulous driver is something of a psychologist. He knows that the passenger ninety-nine times out of a hundred doesn't sit with his eyes glued on the flag. He is preparing to alight or looking at the traffic or the windows. So just as the cab rolls up to the curb the driver flips the flag upright, thus setting the "clock" back to zero, and says pleasantly, "A dollar ten." And ninety-nine times out of a hundred he used to get away with it. But not now.

That is much neater than the old device of taking the longest possible route, and besides it saves gasoline and tires.

It sometimes pays also to see that the "clock" is at zero on entering the cab. It might not be. By reading this far suspicion may have been aroused that not all taxi drivers are lily pure and they have been known in rare instances to run a half dollar or so on the clock before picking up a fare.

In fairness to the taxicab drivers he said, however, that it usually is unjust and impolite to question the figures on the clock. The meters are correct. The city takes great pains to see that they are. Before a meter can be installed on a taxi it is sent to the laboratory in West Fifty-seventh street and tested first for twenty-four hours waiting time. If it records \$38 (10 cents every four minutes) then it is tested for fifty miles of distance.

This is a complicated process, involving the perimeter of automobile wheels and the number of revolutions of wheels of certain sizes to the mile. But a tiny motor spins the meter the required number of thousands of revolutions, and if at the end of the theoretical half century jaunt the clock reads \$20.10 it is stamped "approved" and is issued.

The taxi owners—60 per cent. of the taxicabs in New York are owned by the drivers—rent the "clocks" from various companies. When they get a new meter they are obliged to go round to the Bureau of Licenses, the front wheels of the car are jacked up and a motor spins them another fifty miles to see that it is working properly. If

so, it is sealed and O. K'd. After that it is inspected every four months.

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tomorrow. Five little ones and his wife are waiting to be fed at home and the price of bread is rising.

"Ah! A fare! And such a fare! A figure in evening clothes, overcoat slung carelessly over one arm, sick hat at a perilous angle, bursts through the swinging doors of your rum palace. A large yellow bill contrasts prettily with the white pocket

of a rumpled waistcoat as it protrudes from a bulging pocket.

"Taxi!" says a stentorian voice. One of the virtues of the word "taxi" is that it can be pronounced clearly and loudly in the last stage preceding coma.

"I shay, driver, take me to Shev'n-shy-shy-shy street. I mean Shilvinty-shy-shy street an' Brawway. An' be quick, driver."

The cab rolls away with its heavy load. And at Seventy-seventh street and Broadway will our hero conscientiously examine the clock, deduct 10 cents because he lost distance by skidding at Columbus Circle, and humbly request 80 cents.

He will not. Tain't human, that's all.

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